

**“Letting Grace Define Us”**  
**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13**  
**A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes**  
**Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA**  
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Like so many people all around the globe, I’ve been watching Vancouver this week. The athletes taking part in the Olympics there are so impressive, and to see them compete is really something. I am always amazed by the skills they have honed over years of practice . . . the performances they render despite terrific pressure . . . the grit and courage they demonstrate even after jaw-dropping accidents and painful injuries. The Olympic medals honor all of that – the hard work and talent and determination of the winners.

Of course, behind each medal is a whole host of stuff for which the athletes cannot take credit. They have inherited good genes for one thing; they have straight bones, strong hearts, great hair (at least, a lot of them do). They have that guy who maintains the ice rink back home, and the folks who built the ski lift. They had that first teacher who noticed their potential, a family often incredibly supportive, coaches who cultivated their talent. They had doctors treating their injuries . . . therapists massaging their muscles. They fell, but did not shatter their spines. They flew from the course, but didn’t die. There is always a combination of grit and grace behind each winner. A mix of labor and luck.

The athletes I like best are the ones who appreciate that. They hold the story of all they’ve achieved for themselves alongside the story of the things that have come to them freely, as gifts from others. They’ve been lucky, they say, or fortunate or blessed . . . and they pause to give thanks where thanks is due. Then . . . they kiss their medals.

The medals honor their achievement. They reward the skater who landed his axel or the snowboarder who rocked the halfpipe or the team that scored the most goals. They go to the student who gets “A’s” on her report card . . . the salesman whose numbers are up. They go to the manager who increases productivity . . . the chef with the flakiest pastry . . . the artist who redefines fashion . . . the soldier who acts with valor . . . the researcher who makes a breakthrough. And rightly so, in a way. We celebrate human achievements. Rightly so.

But today’s text from Deuteronomy describes a radically different celebration, and I’d like to spend just a few minutes considering it and its implications for us.

The text begins with a farmer collecting the first fruits of his harvest. This produce is grown from seeds the farmer planted in ground he probably worked hard to till. The fruit is growing on plants the farmer tended through the long period of their growth. It ripens at a time when the stores from the previous year have nearly run out, but the harvest is coming in, and folks can trust there will be more. The farmer gathers the first fruits of the new harvest, fills a basket with them, and takes them to the temple

(or the church, right? – the place of worship). He gives the basket to whatever priest is working that day. It's the farmer's offering. And while the priest sets the food before God's altar, the farmer makes his statement of faith.

He says a creed that tells the story of God's actions that have carried the farmer throughout his life – God's goodness that made him what he is today. Only, the creed begins with something that happened a *long* time before the farmer was even born. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor," the farmer begins. He's speaking of Jacob, who sought refuge in Egypt during a time of famine; his story is told in the book of Genesis. Jacob's family couldn't make a living in Canaan, so they migrated to Egypt where there was food and work. (Sounds a lot like immigrants today, if you think about it. *A hungry Mexican was my ancestor . . . ?*)

The creed this farmer recites emphasizes the vulnerability and destitution from which God delivered the farmer's ancestors – from which God delivered *him*, essentially; the creed uses first-person pronouns throughout. As he says it, the farmer claims the story as his own. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien few in number. And there he became a great nation – mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, *we* cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors. The Lord heard our voice and saw our toil and oppression. God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders. God brought us into this place and gave us this land, which flows with milk and honey. So I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that *you*, O Lord, *have given me.*"

Once the farmer had been without land, without prospects, without particular skill or hope. So says the creed. Now he has a field, crops, the harvest due. He's worked hard to grow it, no doubt. For all we know he bends to kiss the land, feeling happy – proud of his efforts. But the creed reminds him: what the farmer has, God has given him.

God's grace emphasized in this liturgy is the foundation of the Christian faith, too – the salvation we've received in Christ. As Paul says in Romans, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Everyone who calls. What we don't often talk about is how hugely threatening this can be to our sense of worth, as we typically construct our worth. We so often define ourselves by our place on the podium, our position on the team, the flag we carry, the harvest we gather, the accomplishments we can list. "What do you do?" we ask each other. "Where are you from? Send me your résumé." To focus on what we have *received* instead of what we've achieved or earned would be a monumental shift for most people. To define ourselves according to *grace* – the grace God gives to everyone – would be counter-cultural and *hard*. We tend to believe we are special when we do something better than our peers – when we prove ourselves "outstanding" in some particular way. If we're all equally valuable, then what makes *any* of us special? But these texts level the field. They tell us that what matters most is not what we do to distinguish ourselves. What matters most is what God has done *for us* – what God wants to do for everyone.

I've started reading Sara Miles' new book, *Jesus Freak*. As many of you know, Sara began a food pantry in her neighborhood church after a midlife conversion convinced her of Christ's presence all around and of Jesus' call to perform practical acts of mercy by caring for others in need. Toward the beginning of the book, Sara talks about her church's Friday food pantry and its Sunday Eucharist as different expressions of the same thing. The pantry is not a "feeding ministry," she says. It is *church* – where hundreds of people gather each week around an altar to share food and to thank God. To me this underlines the connection between worship and service, but not only that. It also emphasizes the fact that *we are all recipients of God's grace*. We have received our daily bread – indeed, all the blessings of this life – as a gift. The food we have did not originate with us, even if we grew it. It is not something we produced or own and have the right to give others. It may *be* that, but is not *only* that. Our food is something God produced, gave us, and calls us to share.

Sara's pastor says that "the surest sign of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist (the surest sign that God blesses our communion) is when there's somebody completely inappropriate at the altar." "Frequently that's me," Sara says. She's described herself as a blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian, left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism – not the sort of person her reporter colleagues ever expected to see exchanging blessings with street-corner evangelists . . . not the child her parents ever thought would wind up preaching or serving the Lord's supper. But *isn't that like* the God of the immigrant, the destitute, the outsider – the God of people who are wholly inappropriate: God welcomes *everybody* in and calls us to feast together. After the farmer makes his offering in church, he's told to host a meal for the Levites and the aliens in the land. And so, at a table piled high with the bounty of the Lord, the farmer, priest, and outcast raise their glasses and toast God's goodness together.

We do not earn our place at God's table. It is made for us. It is made for Christians *by Jesus* who, it must be said, was not terribly discriminating. The surest sign that Jesus was hosting a meal *was* the presence of someone completely inappropriate at the table. (I think Sara's pastor has that right!) Christ included Pharisees, prostitutes, sinners and outcasts of every kind. He made us all beneficiaries of God's grace.

In the wilderness Satan tempted Jesus to prove he was better than folks like us . . . to show he was extraordinary – the *best*, even. Turn these stones into bread, Satan said; I know you can. Claim this land – these kingdoms – for your very own. Jump from this building; God's angels will come to catch *you*. But Jesus wouldn't do it . . . wouldn't let such actions define him. He did nothing to set himself apart. Instead, he relied on the grace available to all God's children – the food, the work, the security God gives without discrimination – to the farmer, the landless, the destitute, the alien in our country. To the athlete, the couch potato, the lesbian left-wing Jesus freak. To you, to me, to everybody. What matters most is what God freely gives. Jesus knew it, and he let God's grace define him . . . let it define everyone he went on to meet.

In this season of Lent, if we could grow just a bit more like Jesus in our reliance upon God's grace, in our security within God's love, and in our gratitude for God's good

gifts . . . that would really be something, I think. It would be worth watching. It would be, as the scriptures say, better than silver or gold.